

# Voices from the Past. Rearranging Values in Times of Crisis: The Example of North Indian Vaishnava Hagiographies

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## Abstract

This article is focussed on the study of a particular case of shift in religious values embodied in two seventeenth-century North Indian compilations of hagiographical narratives, elaborated within the religious community of Vallabhacharya, namely the collections of the 84 and 252 Vaishnava saints. The sect is presented against the backdrop of the mosaic-shaped Hindu landscape, where new ideas about sainthood and merit had come to challenge the established hierarchies and prevalent practices. The hagiographies, as a typical example of the ‘story with a message’ genre, bring down the lofty theological concepts, expounded in Sanskrit, to down-to-earth examples, voiced in everyday language, thus functioning as a practical guidance for followers of the sect. The article deconstructs the way narratives negotiate the establishing of a new religious value—*bhakti*—while addressing, at the same time, the devotees’ more traditional concerns, pertaining to the well-being of the forefathers, ritual purity or the concept of salvation, and promoting to them the lifestyle of economically engaged householders against the withdrawal of renouncement.

## Keywords

Hagiography, *bhakti*, Vallabhacharya, *Caurāsī vaiṣṇavan ki vārtā*, *Do sau bāvan vaiṣṇavan ki vāatā*, Gokulnath

While we do live in transformative times, times have been transformative before. This article will focus on one particular case of adaptation in the sphere of religious values, embodied in a group of North Indian hagiographical narratives known as *varta* (*vārtā*). These narratives belong to the sect of Vallabhacharya, an influential sixteenth-century theologian and founder of the doctrine of the path of grace (*puṣṭimārga*) and of a religious community well represented today in western India (Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra), as well as among the Indian diaspora in Europe and the USA. While presenting itself as biographical, the genre of the hagiographies is a far more complex affair, involving a more or less explicit ideological framework and specific strategies directed towards the audience. In order to appreciate their potential for innovation and transformation operated within the values paradigm of the sect, some explanations are needed about these types of texts as a genre and the way they function within the community. Then, we

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will turn towards the values themselves: what new elements does Vallabhacharya add to the existing prevalent traditions of Hindu praxis and how is the accommodation negotiated? Finally, we will turn to the *vartas* to examine how all of this translates into practical examples that are able to serve the community of disciples as guidance throughout the practical difficulties of everyday life.

## The Origin of the *Vartas*<sup>1</sup>

Throughout his life, Vallabhacharya (1479–1531) composed a number of theological treatises explicating his particular version of the *advaita* philosophical system known as *śuddhadvaitavāda*. While these founding texts were predictably written in the prestigious Sanskrit language, the stories about the lives of the saints of the community was compiled in prose in *Braj Bhasha*, the local vernacular language. They were presumably composed by Gokulnath (1552–1641), Vallabhacharya's grandson. Gokulnath did not write anything himself. The stories were initially transmitted orally, and it is unclear by whom they were transcribed. According to the more popular version, the editing was done by Hariray (1590–1715), Gokulnath's grandnephew, under the supervision of Gokulnath himself. Besides the scribal work, Hariray supplied each *varta* with a commentary known as *bhāv prakāś* (clarification of the feeling). Today, the stories exist in two voluminous compilations known as the *Caurāsī vaiṣṇavan kī vārtā* (*The lives of the 84 Vaishnava*, henceforward 84VV) and *Do sau bāvan vaiṣṇavan kī vārtā* (*The lives of the 252 Vaishnava*, henceforward 252VV). The less numerous cohort of Vaishnavas was initiated into the sect by the founder himself, while the rest were followers of Vitthalnath, his successor. The most popular modern editions also include the commentary of Hariray. The most widely disseminated printed editions of 84VV are based on that of Parīkh (1948), which is itself based, according to the editor, on a manuscript dated 1695. The manuscript pedigree of the 252VV is under discussion (see McGregor, 1976, p. 209). The first printed edition is in three volumes (Parīkh & Śarma, 1951–1953).

So, if Vallabhacharya's writings<sup>2</sup> represent the theological core and esoteric essence of the doctrine, presented to the followers in a sophisticated but hardly accessible medium, Gokulnath developed their exoteric aspect in a language spoken in everyday life, as a practical guide for their application. Typologically, *The Lives of the Saints* belongs to the timeless Indian tradition of educating through example, just like the *Mahabharata* or the *Panchatantra*. Unlike the *Mahabharata*, in spite of a well-attested manuscript tradition and of their sheer volume (more than 2,000 densely printed pages for the modern editions of the two compilations, including Hariray's commentary), the *puṣṭimārga* hagiographies are usually relegated to the marginal regions of the literary realm and rarely catch the attention of historians of literature. There are indeed factors which make their incorporation in the Indian *belles-lettres* problematic.

The main challenge they present is of an aesthetic nature. While there has always been a preference in the Indian culture for orality against the written word, Indian texts often present themselves as the transcription of a dialogue between persons of authority, and the *vartas* push the boundaries of what may be considered a written text one step further. They are not only written in prose (hardly used for any subject of importance) but also the closest in style to the uncut stenogram of a real-life speech act. Repetitions, redundant conjunctions and endless sentences make them unpalatable for literary connoisseurs. The commentary of Hariray, while adding a new layer of meaning, also makes the stories sound convoluted and adds technicalities requiring more patience from the reader. Function has often superseded beauty in historical texts. In the case of the *vartas*, beauty has never even been a consideration.

While *The Lives of the Saints* has failed to capture the imagination of literary historians, to anyone interested in the sociology of religions, they are a mine of information. They stage characters from the most diverse backgrounds: there are Hindus and Muslims, married women and prostitutes, village and

city dwellers, hermits and family men, brahmins and shudras, carpenters, farmers and merchants. Each protagonist is meticulously located and identified through his social status, family network and affiliations. This is very much in the spirit of the *bhakti* ideology itself, according to which the path to salvation through love is open to everybody, regardless of caste, sex or education. It also reflects an image the sect wants to project about itself. Lastly, it gives us a glimpse of what the early sixteenth-century North Indian society could have been like.

## The Hagiographical Genre

Hagiographies are a peculiar kind of texts, thriving in the ambiguous territory between historiography and literature. Initially coined within the Christian tradition (from the Greek ἅγιος [holy] and γραφία [writing]), its scope has extended to include all biographical narratives of sainthood, independently of the religious traditions they belong to. A common characteristic of hagiographical texts is that they cannot be treated as reliable historical sources. Sainthood is not a personal quality, it's a sanction bestowed on an individual by a community or by the authoritative voices of that community. By carefully constructing biographies of saints, hagiographical narratives are engaged in the process of building and sustaining public memory. Finally, they often reflect a certain reflection of itself that the community strives to disseminate for the benefit of its members as well as, to some extent at least, to the outside world.

Some characteristics of the hagiographical process in India can be perceived only in a comparative perspective. First, the Indian preference for an oral mode of exposition bears a mark on the structure of the narratives across religious traditions (Hindu, Sikh, Jain or Buddhist). Moreover, while the Christian ideology has imposed a canon for the biographies of the saints, in India, we can find transfers of themes, motives and whole episodes across religious boundaries within the same geographical and cultural area. The second feature is that in India, the work of relating and reinterpreting *The Lives of the Saints* is still an ongoing process. Today, even if the texts in 84VV and 252VV have been established long ago and the printed editions show little variation, the narratives are still recreated and reinterpreted in films, sermons, popular brochures, YouTube videos and internet forums. As the anthropological study of Bachrach (2018) shows, today the *vartas* are read and discussed in communal gatherings as *satsaṅg* – the interacting with likeminded members of the community established as a devotional practice since the times of Vallabhacharya.

## The Crisis in Religious Values and the Advent of *Bhakti*

From a larger perspective, sixteenth century is a time of deep ideological shifts in the Hindu religious thought. Following the injunctions of one's *dharma*, conforming to the norms of purity and performing the prescribed rituals according to one's caste, gender and social status has increasingly been perceived as a limited solution to the challenges of human condition. A worldly life, even when lived in full compliance with the complex set of requirements imposed by tradition, does not offer any permanent solution for the individual soul. This impermanence is perceived as a form of suffering.

The complex system of public and private rituals inherited from the Vedic period gradually came to be understood as inadequate or incomplete. Its core flaw resided in its connection to desire. Just like every action in this world, rituals are performed out of egotistic greed, out of the wish to acquire something, material or otherwise. This fundamental corruption at the heart of ritual action entangles humans into an endless chain of impermanent results, which end up producing new desires. Life within a society inevitably

binds humans to the transient, short-lived, endless circle of death and rebirth, while the eternal foundation of the universe remains hidden and inaccessible.

One answer Hindu anthropology offers to this existential dilemma is renunciation. Withdrawing from the world by severing all family and social ties is a radical but well-attested path many individuals have taken in their quest for permanence. On the other hand, various systems of thought have sought less drastic options by incorporating, in different ways, the outlook of the renouncer within that of the householder. Thus, the *Bhāgavad Gītā*, one of the most revered texts of Hinduism, offers one such option: put simply, the householder must learn to perform every action imposed by his condition without desiring its result. He must instead dedicate it to the supreme God in an attitude of total surrender. In this way, even the most profane actions are purified from egotistic motivation and become a form of sacrifice. This mental renunciation is a way to position all ritual activities within the inner world of the individual, a method for internalizing sacrifice.

One of the concepts the *Bhagavad Gītā* mentions several times when enunciating the appropriate attitude towards the divine is *bhakti*. The term is etymologically related to the Sanskrit root *bhaj*, meaning to share or to be part of. It is often translated as ‘devotion’ or ‘adoration’. In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, it is most often connected to *yoga*, which is part of the spiritual discipline that one must strive to maintain throughout the turmoil of daily life. Several centuries after the composition of the *Bhāgavad Gītā*, Vallabhacharya and other charismatic theologians developed the emotional potential of this concept while establishing their religious communities in the Braj area of North India, where Krishna was born as an avatar of the god Vishnu.

To put it simply, *bhakti* instrumentalizes emotions as a path to salvation. In lieu of the mental discipline, prescribed by the *Bhāgavad Gītā*, a demanding method requiring metaphysical knowledge and intellectual strength, *bhakti* offers a more accessible approach of the divine through the cultivation of a fixed set of feelings. This nomenclature of emotions is not specific to Vallabhacharya’s theology and is widely adopted, with some specific distinctions, in the practices of the different sects based in Braj. It generally includes four modes of devotion: parental love for Krishna (modelled on the feelings of Yashoda, Krishna’s adoptive mother, this mindset is particularly favoured by Vallabhacharya), friendship (modelled on the attitude of Krishna’s companions, the cowherds), a woman’s feelings for her lover (in this case, the mythical model is Radha, or the milkmaids, *virah*, or love in separation being a variant of this mode) or the feelings of a devoted servant towards his master.

*Bhakti* is one of the big religious innovations which have swept across the vast and varied Indian landscape and transformed in different degrees the mosaic pattern of religious creeds and communities that is Hinduism. While it has been adopted and embodied into sets of practices by different traditions, its Krishna-centred version is unique in the meticulous and, at the same time, tangible manner it has developed emotional strategies for salvation. The religious emotions at play are not metaphysical by nature; in fact, they are fundamentally not different from those we experience through the attachments we form in life. They just need to be redirected to their true and natural recipient, the divine person Krishna. This particular down-to-earth quality of Krishna *bhakti*, its connection to ordinary experience, is something we will also see being reflected in the *vartas* of the sect of Vallabhacharya.

## **When Times Are Changing: Rearranging Old Values and Validating the New**

The purpose of this brief contextualization was to allow us to better appreciate the ideological challenge taken by the author(s) of the hagiographical narratives and to understand their function as text in the

community and in the world at large. To us, they are of particular interest precisely because they are peripheral, distinct from the founder's direct enunciation in Sanskrit of the core theological precepts of the sect. They are theology in the flesh: they transpose abstract principles into a narration where the actors (both human and divine) do and say things. For the devotees, they function like an interface between the sect and society at large. As a literary product, they are a typical example of the 'story with a message' genre. They share with their European analogues a certain type of narrative simplicity and realism and an important didactic aspect. As the 'roman à these' typically does, they give the audience interpretative keys to reality, the combination of which constitutes the ideological framework of the sectarian community. On the one hand, they inform on the 'crisis' at play: the undergoing social conflicts and challenges bringing the need to reinvent the past in order to prepare the future. In the competitive religious landscape of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century North India, they strive to construct a public memory in a way appealing to the larger number of followers, both present and prospective. On the other hand, the *vārtās* possesses an important pragmatic aspect: they contain implicit injunctions on how a true disciple should be, think and act. Thus, on a deeper level, they subtly rearrange clusters of meaning related to caste, gender, sainthood, salvation and social behaviour and, in doing so, instil a new hierarchy of values.

## **Bhakti and Ritual**

*The Lives of the Saints* stages Vallabhacharya (and his successor Vitthalnath) travelling across North India and recognizing through a sharpness of vision that goes beyond appearances the true value of events and people. The divine souls<sup>3</sup> among men are distinguished by an outstanding purity of heart. They perform the service to their 'Thākur-jī', their personal deity, with a fervour and singlemindedness, which are the direct results of their strong and stable emotional connection to the deity. This connection is immediately perceived by Vallabhācharya, who then proceeds to perform the initiation (*brahmasam-bandha*) by giving the sacred mantra (*śrī kṛṣṇaḥśaraṇam mama*) to the newly promoted saint. The capacity to experience emotion is the single most valuable quality of a devotee: the narratives make this principle explicit through an infinite variety of episodes and characters. Everything else stems from it and, vice-versa, no religious act brings any merit if performed outside the appropriate emotional mode. Thus, the central importance of *bhakti* is confirmed as the driving energy which makes salvation possible and the hallmark of the path inaugurated by Vallabhacharya.

But introducing a new supreme value can be problematic when this value is entering a universe already saturated with ideas about how to act religiously. Vallabhacharya does not negate these ideas, but builds upon them while setting priorities and negotiating conflicts. While his own writings feature seemingly unproblematic descriptions of his philosophical system, his understanding of the nature of the divine, the bond that connects it to the individual souls and the impurities and obstructions they have to face in the realization of that bond, the hagiographies deal with practical matters, solving through example cases where values clash with one another in the course of daily practice of the *puṣṭimārga*.

## **Purity vs Bhakti**

Love is notorious for disregarding rules. In the life of the community of Vallabhāchārya though, it is channelled in a highly elaborate *sevā* or service of the temple deity. The lesser devotees will see in the

temple images material symbols of the God. To the divine souls endowed with a special quality of vision, though, they are nothing less but living and breathing divine beings (*svarūpa*) and are treated as such throughout a highly regulated daily regimen from waking them up in the morning to putting them to sleep at night, including the preparation of appropriate food offerings later distributed to the devotees as *prasād*. The manipulations of divine images, both in the temples and at home, and the cooking of the food require the attending devotees to be in a state of absolute purity of body and mind. *The Lives of the Saints* describes situations when the very traditional concept of ritual purity clashes with the urge of the protagonists to express their unbound affection through the service of their personal deity.

Thus, chapter 8 of the *varta* of Kumbhandas (83 in 84VV), one of the celebrated *aṣṭachāp* poets, whose songs still accompany the daily routine in the temples of the sect, tells the following story: one of the sons of Kumbhandas got killed by a tiger while trying to protect a cow. Some villagers rushed to inform Kumbhandas of the tragedy. Hearing about what happened, Kumbhandas fell unconscious on the ground. No one was able to bring him back to his senses. Finally, Vitthalnath (the successor of Vallabhacharya as the head of the sect) was called to the spot. He explained to the distressed audience that the reason for Kumbhandas's passing out is not grief for his son but apprehension of the uncleanness of the period of mourning (*sūtaka*), which will prevent him from entering the temple. Then, he called to Kumbhandas that he would be allowed to enter the temple. Kumbhandas immediately recovered consciousness.

This is a typical example of how the hagiographies work. This one simple story, very cursorily summarized here but narrated in great details in the original, is exemplary in two ways. First, it shows how, in exceptional cases, *bhakti* supersedes the requirement of purity. Second, it confirms Kumbhandas as an exemplary saint, who, while a *pater familias*, does not get upset by the death of a son as much as by the perspective to be separated for a time from his beloved deity.

There are several other stories of *bhakti* overriding purity concerns, and they involve mostly women. This is to be expected: the life of a woman typically covers far more occasions of impurity than that of a man. The story of Virbai (61 in 84VV) tells us how desperate she was for being, like Kumbhandas, in a *sūtaka* state after giving birth to a son and, consequentially, unable to perform the service of her Thakurji (the deity's image installed in her home) the way she had been instructed by Vallabhacharya. In this case, the deity started calling for her from the altar. She replies to him: 'My Lord, I am trapped in the darkest hell!' Then she explains the situation. In this case, the deity himself instructs her to disregard her ritually impure state, clean her body and perform the *sevā*. As a paragon of devotion, Virbai measures up to Kumbhandas: while he was shown to be indifferent to the death of his son, she compares the birth of her son, traditionally the single most desirable event in the life of a married woman, to 'the darkest hell'!

A third story is worth retelling here because it somehow conjures up the worst case of cumulative impurity – a menstruating prostitute. It is included in the commentary to the *varta* of Benidas and Madhodas (9 in 84VV). Madhodas used to live with an unnamed prostitute. After they separated, she nearly starved herself to death in order to convince Vitthalnath to initiate her. He finally agreed and entrusted her with an image, and after learning the ropes from the other devotees, she devoted herself wholeheartedly to the service. The other devotees warned her, though, that she could not touch any water involved in the *sevā* during her period. She carried on nevertheless, out of excessive love. The devotees started avoiding her and reported her to Vitthalnath as soon as he returned to town. She pleaded her case, and Vitthalnath could see how happy her personal deity was in her company, so he let her continue the service her way. At the same time, he enjoined the other devotees to not emulate her and to keep following the rules.

The end of the story shows that *bhakti* does not automatically win the upper hand. Accommodating values is not a straightforward affair. In other narratives, the food prepared for the deity can get soiled by an improper person's gaze or even by a sound. Then, the god living in the temple refuses it and later

complains of hunger. In several narratives, polluted food functions as a narrative trigger, pushing the story into establishing subtle hierarchies.

In a larger perspective, these narratives concern not only purity but also the importance of following the very precise and complex rules of *sevā* established by Vallabhacharya. The various occurrences, when rules have been transgressed, represent a particular focus in the hagiographical narratives. Even in cases like those cited above, when transgression has been endorsed by a higher authority (Vallabhacharya, Vitthalnath or Krishna himself) as the result of excessive love and thus constitutes the proof of outstanding sainthood, the commentary of Hariray often reminds that these exceptions should not be interpreted as encouragement and that rules should be followed at all times as far as material conditions allow.

## **Bhakti and Salvation**

The concept of salvation is one of the few fundamental notions that hold together the exceedingly varied world of Hinduism. With minor variations, it consists in the understanding that humans are able to achieve liberation from the cycle of deaths and rebirths where the laws of karma hold them captive. In the philosophy of Vallabhacharya, this concept is still present,<sup>4</sup> although not very much elaborated upon. In fact, as a philosopher, he is caught in a dilemma. According to tradition, liberation is the ultimate goal of all religious practices. Still, the cultivation of *bhakti* through *sevā* is a religious practice of such a nature that establishing a goal will pervert its very essence. In other words, as far as *bhakti* is concerned, teleology corrupts. A measure of spontaneity is essential even when *bhakti* is made to flow within the strict channels of the *sevā* cannon. Cultivating *bhakti* means unlocking a source at the very heart of the human condition. Even if salvation comes out as a benefit from this practice, it should not be desired, much less posited as an aim from the very beginning.

The hagiographies too hardly mention salvation. Instead, they elaborate a kind of alternative to it, a plane of existence where all the living souls are female companions of Krishna<sup>5</sup> and from where, for different reasons, they descend on earth. As systematically as every *varta* states, in the very beginning, the name, caste and place of birth of every saint, the commentary of Hariray identifies him or her as the incarnation of a precise female character from the metaphysical plane (the eternal *līlā*). This is valuable information: some of these female companions have a direct access to the divine couple (Krishna and Radha, who in the Vallabha community is called Svaminiji), others are attached to the first circle of close attendants, while lesser souls are attendants of the attendants. The location on the metaphysical plane gives the reader a warning about the stature of the saint and the importance of his or her *varta* before it has even begun.

While desiring salvation corrupts *bhakti*, the desire to remain forever engaged in the divine *sevā* is its natural outcome and, therefore, fully appropriate. Still, the traditional concept of salvation remains present when, occasionally, questions are raised concerning the afterlife of the ancestors of the devotees. Thus, chapter five of the *varta* of Damodardas Harsani, the opening *varta* in 84VV, describes the ritual ceremony (*śraddhā*) that Damodardas set up for his ancestors in which Vitthalnath accepted the role of the officiating priest. The commentary explains that while the merit of such a great saint as Damodardas automatically brings soteriological benefits to all of his forefathers, since they were not formally initiated in the path of grace, a connection to it must still be established. Hence, a traceable spiritual link was established through Vitthalnath performing the rites. This motive of establishing connections through which the benefits of *bhakti* can be reaped by ancestors or members of the same family is reaffirmed, under a variety of circumstances, in several *vartas*. We can suppose the authors felt the need to respond in a reassuring way to existing concerns in potential adepts of the sect.

Besides the spiritual bondage (the initiation) family connections remain important for the sectarian network: Vallabhacharya himself is supposed to have married in order to strengthen the chain of transmission of the path through his bloodline. Today, the leaders of the sect are his direct descendants. He has also set the example for his followers, the great majority of whom are householders engaged in worldly matters.

## **Bhakti and Economic Sustainability**

Just like Vallabhacharya himself, his followers were not supposed to be ascetics. The path of grace maintains no monastic tradition or establishments. Vallabhacharya and Vitthalnath after him have consistently addressed potential followers who, while belonging to different castes, had a lucrative profession. From the very beginning, money has been a concern: the elaborate *sevā*, temple embellishments and sophisticated food preparations require resources and the *vartas* tell many stories of meritorious devotees facing the situation of lacking financial means to perform the service to the deity the way they would have liked. These situations usually get resolved through the reaffirmation of the supremacy of *bhakti*: if the feeling is strong, the deity will happily accept the offering, no matter how simple. Nevertheless, hagiographies have some sound financial advice to give to the devotees for their own moral tranquillity: after all, the inability to perform adequate *sevā* makes the devotees troubled and unhappy, which in turn makes their Thakurji sad, since they are at all times spiritually connected through the flow of emotions.

The first advice is to raise an income through the exercise of a professional activity. *Varta* 70 in 84VV tells the story of a carpenter from Adel who was so attached to Vallabhacharya that he left his family in order to be as close as possible to him. The family, including the carpenter's wife and mother, came to Vallabhacharya's mother and complained that they were starving. Then, Vallabhacharya sent the carpenter back home, promising that he would visit him from time to time. The carpenter was still too obsessed with his master, spending hours on end in conversations whenever he came and constantly thinking about his next visit the rest of the time. Finally, Vallabhacharya decided to limit his visits even further. The commentary goes to explain that the carpenter needed to experience love in separation (*virah*) in order to gain a fuller understanding of *bhakti*.

The second advice is not to take loans, even for the sake of Thakurji. *Varta* 67 in 84VV tells the story of a poor kshatriya woman from Sinhanand, a child widow, who fed her Thakurji roti rolls with ghee and sugar because she could afford nothing better. One day, she borrowed groceries in order to prepare her favourite fried offerings, but the Thakurji reprimanded her, and she never did it again. The commentary explains that loans are bad because the mind, which should be constantly focussed on the Lord, is instead distracted by worries about lenders demanding repayment. Another *varta* cites an exception to this rule. The commentary of *varta* 62 in 84VV describes the plight of a very devout kshatriya couple from Sinhanand who were left destitute because their families disagreed with their ascetic life choices. Advised by Vallabhacharya, they borrowed ₹22 from fellow devotees, which the man dutifully reimbursed after taking a paid job arranged by other devotees. Loans are acceptable only within the spiritual family from like-minded lenders.

The general rule is that all the property of the initiated devotees belongs to Krishna. As long as it is dedicated to the Lord, the adepts are encouraged to earn an honest living and to enjoy their wealth by sustaining their families while performing the *sevā* and helping other members of the sect. Vallabhacharya's community-building policy was a success. Today, the membership still counts many representatives of the affluent classes with a successful professional background, both in India and among the diaspora.

## Caste, Gender and Religious Merit

While the path of grace cannot in good faith be declared to promote gender equality, the *vartas* show, as we have already seen, how the advent of *bhakti* as a religious value has restored some agencies to the female protagonists they feature<sup>6</sup>. The stories about women are far fewer in number than those about men. The printed versions typically tuck them as chapters in *vartas* dedicated to male heroes of the sect. They are often introduced as daughters, wives or mothers of the main characters. Sometimes, their proper names are not mentioned, and they are designated only by their caste and place of birth. Nevertheless, the attention they are given is a measure of the paradigmatic changes operated in the traditional system of values.

One such interesting story about an unnamed Rajput widow is included in chapter two of the *varta* of Rana Vyas (32 in 84VV). She had come to the banks of the Sarasvati river along with relatives to be burnt with her husband's corpse on the funeral pyre and become a sati. Rana Vyas was also there with a friend, looking from a distance and shaking his head at the thought of a life voluntarily wasted in the name of tradition instead of being fulfilled by serving the Lord. The woman saw him shaking his head and lost her resolution. She refused to get on the funeral pyre. Her relatives got upset, told her that she could not go back home, threatened to burn her by force, then finally gave up on her, burnt the husband's body and left her in a hut on the river bank. When Rana Vyas (already a follower of Vallabhacharya) returned there, she harassed him into revealing the reason why he shook his head. This set her on a path which finally led her to initiation and a lifetime of *sevā*.

A widow and a failed sati—it is hard to imagine a more wretched being. The story draws two parallel pictures: the fate reserved to a woman of her circumstances by tradition and the pivotal turn made possible through Vallabhacharya's intervention. *Bhakti* can turn a social outcast into a saint.

Unlike the status of women, the hagiographical narratives are very explicit regarding the caste. In the sectarian community, just like in the eternal metaphysical world of Krishna, castes are irrelevant. It could seem paradoxical then that they are so conspicuously indicated at the beginning of every *varta* as an important identity maker of each saint. Their importance resides, in fact, in their variety: throughout hundreds of pages of hagiographies, the followers of the path of grace appear as a uniquely diverse group homogenized through the received initiation. The attitude towards caste is explicated in the *varta* of Bhagavandas, a brahmin from Hajipur (52 in 84VV). The story begins with Bhagavandas' frustration from having to make a living by performing rituals for the benefit of others. One day on the road, he meets Vallabhacharya who was then travelling east. Vallabhacharya offers Bhagavandas food supplies but refuses to accept any service from him in counterpart, as fetching water or cleaning pots. Bhagavandas was perplexed by the fact that low-caste men and women were doing what he was not allowed to. Then, Vallabhacharya explains that in his community, caste division follows different lines: brahmins are those who experience the Lord, and all the others are shudras. Though Bhagavandas expressed the wish to become a disciple, Vallabhacharya sensed in him too much brahmin pride to accept with an open heart to become a *sevak* (a servant). Finally, step by step, Bhagavandas gained Vallabhacharya's trust and received the initiation.

This story shows in a very explicit manner the adaptation mechanisms at play when a shift of values is set in motion. The vision of the sect does not question the fact that humanity is divided into subcategories to which different rules of purity apply. The difference from the traditional outlook lies only in the definition of the subsets.

In this brief incursion into the world of the lives of the Vaishnava saints, we have identified and cursorily explored several leads where the tension caused by the introduction of new values paradigm

has been addressed and negotiated. Other lines of exploration are also possible. For instance, the *vartas* contain a wealth of information on how the sect wants to present itself to the outside world. Another related theme worth exploiting is the way relations to other centres of power are being conceptualized. The *varta* compilations contain, in fact, many more biographical narratives than announced by the title digits. One *varta* heading can hide several collateral stories, thus bringing the total number of saints to 358. The sheer number of protagonists creates a large-scale picture, a riveting panoptic view teaming with life and a fertile hunting ground for the researcher in quest of connections and meanings.

One of the most captivating features of the *vartas* is how the text constantly reaches out of the written page, offering to the readers cues for the interpretation of their own experiences and shaping their religious imagination. The printed text is dialogical in nature, reflecting the interactions between Gopaldas, Hariray and the early followers of the sect. It is a collective enterprise, consolidating the community and validating its system of values. As Bachrach's work has shown, this effort is perpetuated until the present day through assemblies where the hagiographies continue to be read and discussed by adepts trying to bring out new meanings for the modern environment. The hagiographies are still, in a way, a work in progress. They continue, within the community, to support an ongoing process of adaptation and homogenization.

Lastly, *bhakti* has often been understood as a personal mode of approaching the divine, an emotional experience entirely located within the inner world of the practitioner. This article has tried to bring to the fore its societal dimension. As a religious value, *bhakti* has been a very visible force in shaping social conduct, constructing public memory and reinterpreting traditional values. It also confirms the fact that contrary to the common modern Western perception, religion in India has never been a strictly private affair.

The particular case of the *vartas* is an example of the way an emerging centre of power struggles with the plurality of times through the patient elaboration of a new homogenizing framework. In terms of religious values, time is defined by soteriology. Time can be conceived as linear, circular or a particular variety of the combination of both, but what gives meaning to the temporal dimension of human existence is how it positions the individual with regards to the ultimate goal of salvation. Therefore, the crisis which brought *bhakti* front stage can be read as a collapse of time, a moment when the questioning of the traditional system has given birth to alternative trajectories to salvation, hence to a plurality of times. In a certain sense, what the hagiographies painstakingly do is reconnect the loose ends, repairing the wounded texture of time by stitching together in a new arrangement the ancestral concepts and values embedded in it. While Vallabhacharya does this in a more straightforward manner, through theological and philosophical teachings, the *vartas'* operation theatre is ethics and their method is inductive. Most importantly, they are an integral part of a holistic strategy targeted at shaping collective memory, imagination and practice.

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## Notes

1. On the history, versions and authorship of the hagiographies, see Barz (1994 and 1976) and Tanḍan (1961).
2. For an overview of Vallabhacharya's philosophy, see Barz (1976), Marfatia (1976) and Reddington (1983).
3. Divine souls, or *daivī jīva*, are souls with a potential for salvation in the doctrine of Vallabhacharya (Barz, 1976, pp. 70–72).
4. The term he uses is *uddhāra* and not the more usual *mokṣa*.
5. With few exceptions, some souls can be both female and male companions. The *varta* of Jadavendradas locates him as a bull in the herd of Nanda, Krishna's adoptive father.
6. On the female protagonists in the *vartas*, see also Dalmia (2001).

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